

Cultural Identity and Gender in Northern Ireland: A Space for Soaps?

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Introduction

In the Spring of 1994 I embarked on a study, for an MA dissertation, which was to examine my own notion of identity and how that identity is shaped by numerous influences including that of popular culture. I live in Northern Ireland or the North of Ireland (even the language we use to name our environment carries resonances of religious and cultural identity.) Like many other parts of the world the issue of national identity is paramount here and at a moment in our history when we are searching for lasting peace it is more crucial than ever that we debate this issue.

Identity or perceived identity has been the cause of much death, destruction and sadness in this country and I felt almost compelled to try and find out more about it. In the course of my Master's degree in Media Studies I had been introduced to the work of Benedict Anderson for the first time and found his notion of "Imagined Communities" a fascinating one. In his book of the same name (Anderson, 1983: 6) he examined the phenomenon of popular culture and its contribution to these "Imagined Communities". He defined nation as '*an imagined political community...and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign...all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.*' In going on to trace the origins of the concept of nation he uses the terms '*fraternity*' and '*comradeship*'. His metaphors also include cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers and he makes several references to willingness to die for one's nation, an all too familiar concept in Ireland.

I. Gender, Media, Nation

These are all very male notions which have traditionally and inextricably been associated with the very concept of nationalism itself and so I began to consider what this meant to me as a woman.

Anderson stressed how it was only after the introduction of print based communications that the idea of nation was possible and that the media continue to play an important part in the formation and continuance of nations.

Barbara O'Connor (O'Connor, 1994: 2) has illustrated very well how this was achieved in the new Irish nation of the nineteen twenties and thirties:

"There is no doubt that broadcasting played a major role in the project of building a national 'imagined community' in Ireland both explicitly and implicitly".

I picked up on this idea which has been further developed by others in a European and global context and placed it firmly within Northern Ireland and with women. I chose to pay particular attention to the soap opera "EastEnders" as I have been a viewer for years and I wanted to explore how such a soap opera can contribute to the identity formation of women in Northern Ireland. Was it 'read' differently by Protestants and Catholics? Was it used differently? Does it strengthen or weaken our sense of cultural identity? Does it serve to break down any of the perceived barriers between Catholics and Protestants?

When I started my study I was not even sure that any of these questions could be answered but I intended to draw on the work of many distinguished scholars and hopefully at least some of the people who view these programmes. I also drew on my own experience for I believe that it has a certain validity, limited as it may be.

II. In Search of National and Cultural Identity

I carried out a review of the literature and conducted some small scale ethnographic research by interviewing and participating in discussions with a limited cross section of women, Protestant, Catholic, young and old, working class and middle class. I do not pretend for an instant that this was a hugely significant piece of research but it certainly helped me to make some connections which enriched my own understanding.

At the very least as an educationalist these insights can be passed on to others and hopefully add to the debate which needs to continue if we are to move forward.

As I researched national and cultural identity in an Irish and Northern Irish context I found scant reference to gender. Much of the rhetoric was by men and about men. I found I could identify with the work of Fionnula O'Connor whose book "In Search of a State: Catholics in Northern Ireland" struck many chords with me. She had carried out hundreds of interviews with Catholics in Ireland men and women and found that it was the women who tended to personalise the issue of identity. They were often more ambivalent about their definition of themselves. She quotes a woman similar in age to myself "I think Northern Catholic Identity is in a state of flux" (O'Connor, 1994: 50).

Barbara O'Connor's work had also highlighted for me the false dichotomy between high and low culture which is so prevalent in our society. There were many contradictions inherent in the new Irish state which consciously used the media to perpetuate the romantic myth of a rural idyllic Ireland with 'comely maidens dancing at the crossroads' to quote De Valera, President of Ireland in the early days of the Irish nation and an American by birth. He set himself up as self appointed guardian of Irish purity and depicted television as "the cultural equivalent of atomic energy in terms of the devastation it would wreak on traditional values" (McCloone et al., 1984: 21).

Barbara O'Connor (O'Connor, 1984: 5) in her text, outlines the class, demographic and gender bias of programming by the Irish Broadcasting Service RTE (Radio, Telefis Eireann). She points out that "the cultural tastes of the urban working class were largely ignored... The nature of the relationship between the state and broadcasting institutions, among other factors, played a major role in the gendering of broadcast discourses".

Ironically as Martin McCloone has pointed out (McCloone, 1984: 11) "*it was the much despised form of the continuous serial which broke with romantic representations of Irish rural life, offering, almost for the first time in Irish culture a new realistic aesthetic in the form of the long running serial 'The Riordans'.*"

It is this 'despised' form that I chose to study. The history of soap opera criticism has emphasised its low status. Charlotte Brunson (1991) in '*Pedagogies of the Feminine*' has outlined the study of women's genres and within that the genre of soap operas. She reminds us that in her book "*Loving with a Vengeance*" Tania Modleski (Modleski, 1982: 86) asserts that "*if television is considered by some to be a vast wasteland, soap operas are thought to be the least nourishing spot in the desert.*"

Brunson points out in her article that this is not meant to be a definitive history but it is obvious from her chronology that there has been a significant shift over the years from text to audience.

Even feminist critics have disagreed in their readings of the genre. Whilst Modleski argues that they contribute to the preservation of the status quo for women Dorothy Hobson refers to them as '*progressive texts*'. Other criticisms range from the assertion that nothing happens to the contradictory view that too much happens. Lack of realism and overidentification with characters on the part of viewers are two other contradictory viewpoints.

Ien Ang (1991: 73) in referring to Morley's '*The Nationwide Audience*' says "*Textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves; a certain text can come to mean different things depending on the interdiscursive context in which viewers interpret it*". I became convinced that one's reading of any television text will depend on a range of factors including class, gender, ethnicity, religion and age. It was this belief that I then tested out in my research.

III. Eastenders in Belfast

We do not have an indigenous soap opera in Northern Ireland. In the 1950s there was a radio soap entitled '*The McCooeys*'. It was a humorous serial based on a working class Belfast family. I have been a fan of *EastEnders* since it was launched in 1985 so I decided to examine how it was viewed by a small cross section of women in the greater Belfast area.

EastEnders vies with *Coronation Street* for top ratings. *EastEnders* is much more hard hitting and consciously tackles issues such as abortion, homosexuality and AIDS. I thought it would be interesting to explore whether or not Protestant and Catholic women reacted significantly differently to such a soap.

I administered a fairly lengthy questionnaire based very heavily on Mary Ellen Brown's work in '*Soap Opera and Womens Talk*' and I used the results from these as the basis for participant discussions with four groups of women over a two week period in 1994.

They were all women I knew directly or indirectly but I felt that they were reasonably representative of Northern Irish society by virtue of age, class and cultural background.

Group One

A family group who watch EastEnders together regularly. Middleclass professional Catholics and their school aged daughter.

Group Two

Two nuns in their late twenties. One a teacher and one a student teacher they live in a small house in North Belfast

Group Three

A work based group of five. All Protestant, three professional women ranging in age from late thirties to mid fifties and two women in their twenties who are clerical assistants.

Group Four

Eight working class women living on a housing estate on the outskirts of Belfast ranging in age from early twenties to late sixties. Two were from Catholic backgrounds and two from a Protestant. The others were either children of what we call a mixed marriage (Catholic/Protestant) or in a mixed marriage.

In groups one and two I watched an episode of EastEnders with the women. It proved impractical to do so with Groups Three and Four.

Modleski has expressed reservations about audience research, seeing in it the possible collusion of researcher with mass culture and preferring to rely on textual analysis. I agree with Morley that there is a danger of women's viewing becoming the problematic category for analysis rather than the male 'taken for granted' norm. I also agree with Ang (1991: 103-105) that *"reality cannot be grasped and explained through quantitative methods alone. To capture the multidimensional and complexity of audience activity the use of qualitative methods and thus a move towards the ethnographic is desperately called for."* She reminds us that *"critical audience studies should not strive to tell the truth about the audience. Its ambitions should be much more modest... Because interpretations always inevitably involve the construction of certain representations of reality (and not others) they can never be neutral and merely descriptive."* However it is reassuring to note that Charlotte Brunson's article in the same book argues for the validation of the use of 'I' in academic discourse.

IV. Identity and Gender

The issues examined through the questionnaire were those raised in much of the literature on soaps. The findings were in broad agreement with all of them. Many of the women admitted to a range of activities whilst watching TV, from ironing to reading the paper to feeding the baby. Soap operas in general and EastEnders in particular are predicated on this assumption. It is possible to follow the plot by listening to the dialogue alone. Soaps were the focus of much talk by women particularly in the workplace. Many of the younger women had been introduced to soaps by their mothers and more than half recorded it if they missed it. There were mixed responses to the question "Do you think that soap characters are like real people?" and opinion was also evenly divided over the questions "Do soap's plots seem believable to you?" and "Are soaps like real life?"

Almost everyone agreed that men make fun of soaps and people who watch them because they regard soaps as 'rubbish' and 'boring'. The discussions explored some of these issues in more detail and led onto an examination of some of the more controversial storylines and eventually to talk about identity.

Current storylines at that time included a lesbian relationship, the revelation by a male character to his girlfriend that he is HIV positive and an ongoing cliff hanger about the infidelity of a female character with her husband's brother. There was no clear difference in response to these issues by viewers of different religious or class backgrounds. The main difference was in terms of age with younger respondents being more accepting than their elders but even this was not clear cut, for one middle aged viewer seemed to contradict herself within the space of an hour as to whether or not she was tolerant of homosexuality.

This seems to reflect the complexity of responses that we are all capable of. Each of these women was very involved with the plots but also quite capable of seeing how they were artificial constructions.

For me the most interesting responses were those of the nuns. I had been convent educated for eleven years in the late fifties and sixties (Grammar School and Convent College of Education) and these nuns were very different from those I remembered or indeed had met since.

The fact that they were living in the community and wore jeans and dangly ear rings came as a surprise to me. This impressed on me the danger of stereotyped responses to nuns or anyone else for that matter.

If, as someone from a Catholic background, I found these young nuns disconcerting in their willingness to discuss sexual issues how much more so would this be for Protestants? Or could it be that it was my Catholicism that was causing the problem?

From these moral issues it was relatively easy to move on to a discussion of cultural/ national identity for such identity is often seen in tandem with issues such as abortion, contraception and divorce.

Again there are many contradictions here. Whilst fundamentalist Protestant politicians rant against the strictures of the Catholic church and in particular the symbiotic relationship between Church and State in the Irish republic they have much in common in terms of their attitudes to issues such as abortion and homosexuality. Indeed it is ironic that the Irish Republic's laws on homosexuality are a great deal more liberal than those in Northern Ireland and the recent divorce referendum points to the breaking down of that historic relationship between Church and State.

V. The Northern Irish Identity

This seems to me to be symptomatic of a much more complex understanding of what it means to be Irish. This was reflected in the responses of the women to the question "Would you describe yourself as Irish or British?" In the past this was a simple question with an apparently simple answer. Catholic equates with Irish and Protestant equates with British. For me the most heartening finding was a recognition that identity for these women in Northern Ireland or the North of Ireland is no longer so simple. The Catholics felt that they were not fully Irish because they were not understood or fully accepted across the border and the Protestants felt exactly the same about Britain. This could be seen as a negative thing but in the context of recent conflict the fact that everyone involved from whatever class, age or background was willing to call themselves Northern Irish indicates a bond that is desperately needed on the road to long term peace and reconciliation. One of the nuns said quite categorically "*I'm Northern Irish. The sisters in our southern congregation wouldn't have much understanding of our*

situation". Whilst one of the Protestant women explained "*I'm Northern Irish, definitely not Ulster, I associate that with narrow mindedness*".

The working class women were more reticent. I sensed that this issue wasn't a priority for them. By coincidence more of these women were in mixed marriages so perhaps they had already learnt to compromise or to submerge their own identities.

I also wanted to know if these women would find a local soap opera a worthwhile venture. I was careful not to suggest why this might be but felt it important to establish if a genre which addresses women had a contribution to make to the local discourses on identity. Both Scotland and Wales have their own TV soaps and there are two in the Irish Republic. I asked each group what they thought about the feasibility of a soap set in Northern Ireland, and what issues they felt it could deal with. This is where the clearest differences emerged. Interestingly the differences were not of religious background but of class. Without exception the middleclass women, Protestant and Catholic said they wouldn't particularly want to see a local soap. They felt that it would inevitably be about the Troubles and they did not want to be reminded of this. (The discussions took place prior to the ceasefires.)

The working class women took a totally different attitude and felt that a soap opera, especially one using humour, could confront many of the difficult issues and areas of perceived differences.

This finding may reflect the views of Ronan Bennett who wrote an article in the Guardian Weekend in July 1994 which aroused a storm of controversy. His assertion was that not only the middle classes of the North but the Arts in the North have taken a largely apolitical stance in avoiding the Troubles. To me it is amazing that the women whose lives have been most touched by the conflict - for it was largely the working classes who suffered and lost - are not only more willing to see this conflict represented by a soap but also believe that this can be done, at least in part, through the medium of humour.

At the moment local media coverage consists largely of news, current affairs, sports, some light entertainment and a smattering of fairly high brow arts programming. Perhaps it's time that women and working class women in particular had a space for discourse? This discourse could reflect through the complexity of human relationships the equally complex issue that is identity. The media constantly refers to 'the two communities' in Northern Ireland. It is time that there was a clear acknowledgement that this is a totally simplistic and potentially divisive notion.

Paradoxically I believe that we need to accept that there are a multiplicity of communities and identities and most importantly that "*there are no overall certitudes in Ireland anymore. There's a lot of diversity of thinking, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of trying to assimilate to other cultures*" (President Mary Robinson in conversation with the journalist John Waters). For too long there has been an assumption that Northern Catholic identity is a given. For Catholic, read Irish and Nationalist. Even the Irish language has become a political pawn claimed by many Protestants to be 'republican.' Part of the problem has been this apparent certainty and the notion that the Catholic community is monolithic. Many Protestants are now searching for an identity and there is a resurgence of interest in revisionist history and culture.

Whilst I do not negate the importance of this search I believe that it is too often rooted in the past and the fabricated past for that matter.

King Billy on his white horse (which he never rode) and the rural Irish idyll are both romantic illusions. Binaries have been the order of the day. We may not know what we are, but we certainly know that 'they' are 'the other'. This notion has even inadvertently been promoted by groups who espouse peace and reconciliation. In their laudable efforts to bring the 'two communities' together theirs is a tacit acceptance of oversimplification.

In referring to the work of Stuart Hall, Leslie Roman and Linda K Christian Smith (1988: 23) state that "*we find compelling the argument that popular culture is an important site in the struggle for and against the cultural and ideological hegemony of dominant groups*". Dorothy Smith (1988: 205) also argues that "*The concept of culture has been important recently in restoring our sense of the active engagement of people in the making of their social worlds... Women aren't just the passive products of socialisation; they are active; they create themselves*". Soap operas provide "*shared experiential worlds*" (Clifford in Seiter et al., 1989: 243).

A Conference organised to examine Varieties of Irishness/ Varieties of Britishness reached the same conclusion. One of the recommendations was that a local soap opera could "*provide a forum for dealing with issues of cultural difference and conflict in a way which could reach a wide audience*" (Crozier, 1989: 63). This is already happening both in Russia and Kenya where soap opera is being used to promote changing social attitudes.

Conclusion

Through the medium of representation we can test out our attitudes to both the personal and the political in a non threatening way because it is representation and we know it. They not only affirm the work that women do in the personal sphere but actually endorse the concepts of affiliation and discourse and provide opportunities for women (and men if they wish) to engage in such discourses themselves. Their openness and invitation to readers to read in their own ways also encourages an acceptance that there is no one way of seeing things. A local soap could emphasise the common cultural space that so many of us inhabit so much of the time in Northern Ireland and help us to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman in Northern Ireland.

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Summary: Cultural Identity and Gender in Northern Ireland: A Space for Soaps?

As a fan of EastEnders the purpose of the author's dissertation was to examine current thinking on Gender and Cultural Identity in Northern Ireland through a literature review and some small scale research into the viewing of the soap opera.

The author explored the issues with a group of eighteen Protestant and Catholic women. There were few significant differences in usage across age, class and cultural background. All of the women were capable of resistive readings as well as deep involvement and there was a spread of opinion about some of the more controversial issues dealt with. Attitudes to identity were more complex than often seems apparent in a simplistic reference to 'Two Communities'. The clearest division came on the issue of the feasibility of a local soap opera. Middle class women rejected this idea whilst the working class women welcomed it as an opportunity to explore contentious issues through a familiar medium which has a particular relevance to women.